

CADILLAC **CICATRIX**

A LITERARY DOCUMENTARY

WINTER 2008 ISSUE 02

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WORD
+
ART



NON-FICTION

The Method and Miss Sugar

Deirdre Sinnott

“You’re a bisexual, right?” asked Lisa Sugar, a zaftig woman with a cute round face, a thousand-dollar smile, and a legendary lack of patience. Her outsides and insides were so mismatched that she constantly caught me off guard.

“Yup,” I said. “Why?” We walked up the hill toward the main campus and my dorm room to work on our assignment for scene study class. Now in my second year at college, I itched to be done with acting classes and on to my destiny — directing classes.

“I’ve never seen you with any women,” she said.

“Well — yeah, that’s true. But I know I’m a bisexual by how I feel.” At that moment I sounded more certain than I felt.

“You know the scene we’re going to do from ‘The Killing of Sister George’ is about lesbian lovers, right?”

“Yeah — I know. I read it last night,” I said. “You want me to play George? You play Childie?”

“No. I’ll be George.”

“Really? I just figured.—”

She put her finger to her lips, kissed it and daintily touched my lips. “I’ll be George.”

It seemed strange, I saw myself as the tough one. I had the required androgynous clothing, short haircut, whiskey voice, and broad shoulders. I couldn’t figure how Lisa, with her perfectly defined lips and soft feminine tone could pull off Sister George, one of the butchest characters in the history of the theater. But Lisa Sugar knew her type better than I knew mine.

“Trust me,” she said. “It will be better this way. I want to really work hard on this. We’ve only got two weeks and I need a good evaluation this semester.”

We walked into the dorm and up to my room. Behind the curtain, sitting on my bed, we read and reread the scene. It opens with the young, pretty lesbian, Childie, waiting at home for her lover to return. George enters and announces that she may be written out of the radio soap opera that she stars in called *Applehurst*, the on-going story of a small British village. Her character, Sister George, is so beloved for her good works, country wisdom, and nursing ability that the contrast with the woman she really is — an old, tough, gin-swilling, cigar-smoking lesbian — the deviation is surprising. My character, Childie is bullied and belittled — ultimately leaving Sister George for another woman on the day she gets fired from the soap opera.

“This is flat,” Lisa said, putting aside the script. “I think we ought to do a little improvisation, like we did in class the other day.”

Our Method acting class taught us to try to recall and use happy or tragic circumstances from our own lives when emotions were called for in a scene. The idea was to make the scene as real as possible by not “acting” as if we were upset or in love, but by becoming upset or recalling what it feels like sometimes when you are in love.

The Method school of acting has been described as realistic, genuine, and authentic as well as overindulgent and self centered. This sort of technique never came naturally to me. My feelings were always locked away, far from the surface, unreachable for the purpose of pretending.

Lisa tried to relax, shaking her body, shoulders, and arms to loosen her muscles. When she was finished vibrating, she looked at me. “I know how to relax you,” she said. She surveyed my collection of cassette tapes and found the Best of Bread album and fast forwarded to the song “Make it With You.”

“Would you like to dance?” she asked, holding her hand out for me to take. I placed my fingers tentatively in hers; she pulled me to my feet and wrapped her arms around me. A tremor went through my body as our breasts and bellies touched. While we swayed the singer sang, “ And if you’re wondering what this all is leading to, I want to make it with you .”

I panicked as I teetered on the verge of my first lesbian kiss. I held her, feeling hot and excited, not wanting the moment to go further or to retreat from it. She pulled away, just enough for her hand to guide my chin. Her soft perfect lips met mine, our mouths parted. Tongue met tongue. Kissing Lisa felt totally different from kissing a man, strange and unnerving. My mind raced, jogging from excitement to shock, rejection

to acceptance.

She felt soft in my arms. I tried to concentrate on what I was doing but I was on fire. Blood rushed to every part of me that touched her, each nerve waiting to be touched. I began to press my pelvis against hers, feeling the delightful wetness between my legs.

Lisa pulled back. "Let's read the scene again," she whispered.

This time we generated heat, the scene deepened with interesting moments and interactions. Lisa's plan had worked. Finally, after a few more passes of the scene, she said, "Look, I've got to go. My sorority house is having a meeting. I can't miss it."

"Okay," I said reluctantly.

"We've got to keep doing this," Lisa said with finality. "You should stay on campus over Thanksgiving break to rehearse with me."

"Um — I'll talk to my parents," I hedged.

"Do it — or we're going to suck. You can come to the sorority. Nobody will be there. We can rehearse all weekend."

Lisa left me with another lovely kiss and swept out of my room. I could still feel her body, full and warm, in my arms. She felt like the key to something. My mother's disappointed face darted to the forefront of my thoughts. She'd freak out if she knew. My parents had maintained friendships with several gay men, so it wasn't a matter of prejudice. But things were different with the baby of the family.

As I lay on my bed, replaying the kisses, I fantasized about the upcoming weekend. I dreamed about all the things we'd do together until I fell asleep, full of plans and certain of the uncertainties.

As Thanksgiving approached, I told my parents I had too much work to come home for even a few short days. "Midterms," I explained. "Can't be there."

Full of nervous energy, I walked the subdued campus. This is it, I thought as I approached Lisa's sorority house. I packed an overnight bag, figuring that things would be so great we'd spend the weekend together, making love and rehearsing.

The sorority, a large turn-of-the-century building of stone and paneling, bordered one of the parks. It had a stately wooden interior and stood slightly apart from the rest of sorority row, overlooking the campus. Lisa greeted me in the foyer, grabbed my hand and led me to her bedroom. Her sorority sisters had all fled for the weekend.

Nervousness radiated from me.

Lisa said, "I set up the room the way it's described in the play so we can work on the blocking, get used to moving around." She walked around her room, pointing out

different highlights. "We can change it if you want, but I think we should stick to the script."

"Okay," I said, sitting lightly on three chairs meant to represent a sofa.

As we began rehearsing, I had calmed down enough to get through the scene, I was comfortable with the lines and the blocking, but Lisa had transformed herself. She was Sister George. She was dominating and obsessive, irritated with work and terrified of losing it all, a whirlwind. She strode around the set — swilling gin, biting on a cigar — menacing my character. When our rehearsal broke, she barely changed character.

"Pour me some wine," she said harshly, sitting on an overstuffed chair. "Working with you is like walking through two feet of mud. Why didn't you learn your lines?"

"I — I know most of them. You're not completely off book either," I said, pouring us each a goblet of red wine from the bottle on her dresser.

She smoothed my hand before taking the glass.

"Look," Lisa said. "I don't want to get ripped apart in class. Gerard is nice, but he's a stickler about knowing your lines. If he thinks we've been goofing off he'll fail us." She swirled the wine in her glass before taking a huge mouthful. "I've been in classes with him when, in his oh-so-nice way, he has told students not to waste their time with acting. And he's usually right about them. But I want to blow him out of the water."

"Don't worry," I said moving away from her. "We're not goofing off. I'll study my lines — each time we run through I get better."

"I know you'll get better," Lisa said. "Come here. Don't run away from me."

She leaned forward and snatched my hand, pulling me down so that I had to bend over. Kneeling next to her chair, I thought: We're still rehearsing. Our faces neared, our lips met. She dragged me into her. Then I got lost in her kiss.

"Let's do it again," Lisa said.

"Let's take a break," I said.

"No," Lisa said. "We're doing it again."

"No, we've done it a million times. It's late, let's take a break."

"What did you say?" she snapped.

"Let's take a break."

"You said, 'No.' You don't get to say that. Get up. We're doing it again." Lisa stood up and stepped over me. She got into position for the beginning of the scene.

I threw her a dirty look and slowly assumed my position.

The scene took on new dimensions this time. Resentment simmered below my submissive surface. Her domination took on a sadistic and intense focus. As we neared

the climax, where the two characters fight causing Childie to run to the bathroom to hide, Lisa grabbed my arm. Her fingernails tore at my skin as she tried to stop me from leaving.

I yelped.

"Stay in the moment," she said through gritted teeth.

She picked up the stuffed animal I brought as a prop to replace the doll the script asked for. "Can you hear me Childie?" she yelled in character toward the "bathroom" I was sitting in. "I've got Emmeline here, your favorite doll. If you don't come out of the bathroom at once — I'm going to pull Emmeline's head off!"

Lisa started to tear the head off my stuffed animal, an old tattered pink dog that I had loved since infancy. I leapt up, grabbed my pink dog and continued the scene. Sparks flew as Lisa made me eat the cigar Sister George had been smoking.

"That will teach you to be rude," she said, still in character, ending the scene, me with tobacco in my mouth, her standing over me, eyes bright, smiling.

I spat out the tobacco. "You really scratched me," I said, rinsing the rancid taste out of my mouth. "I'm bleeding." I held my arm up to her, showing the trickle of blood across my wrist.

"Poor baby, I'm so sorry," Lisa said as she pushed me toward the chair and began to tenderly clean the wound with a tissue. "I'll get you a bandage. Stay right here." She disappeared into the sorority house, returning minutes later with supplies. I washed down my shock with a gulp of wine.

"You were excellent, Deirdre. I think we nailed it," Lisa said.

"You mean you nailed me," I said.

"Don't be angry. It was an accident."

"You were going to rip my pink dog apart."

"No," she said, trying now to sooth me. "Stand up. I want to make sure this bandage stays on." I stood facing her. She ran her fingers over the bandage and up my arm, hooking one hand behind my neck.

"You're not angry any more, right?" she whispered.

I gulped, remembering her fingernails tearing my flesh. "No," I said finally.

And we kissed.

Then she slipped her hands under my shirt, rubbing her palms over my smooth stomach and pulling my tee-shirt off she turned me away from her, caressing me. She unhooked my bra and glided her hands across my breasts, then down over the front of my jeans. I stared at the ceiling, my own fear and heat merging. Her hands explored me,

lingering, pressing, nearly blotting any remaining nervousness.

“Undress me,” Lisa said. I knelt to remove her shoes, pulled at her shirt, tugged at her panties and when she was naked, stripped off my jeans and let her lead me to the bed.

As we kissed and licked and rubbed each other, my thoughts were distant, judgmental. She didn’t seem to be enjoying the sex and I couldn’t make her orgasm. I felt awkward and inexperienced. When we were done, I apologized.

“You were better than any man,” she told me.

While we made love I felt so self-conscious that I never even considered having an orgasm. All of my fantasies about this moment — about how pleasurable being with a woman would be and about how different I might feel — were wrong. While the gender of the person I slept with had changed, I hadn’t. I still held onto the “No, no, no,” that echoed when things got intimate. I had run from fear of men straight into fear of myself. Inside, I actually embraced the cool distance that I thought I wanted to break. Letting go seemed easy in my fantasies. But reality proved that I still lacked an essential truth that forever blocked me from enjoying life as other people did. Cramped in Lisa’s twin bed, clinging to the edge, I hardly slept all night, afraid to wake her.

The next week we presented the scene in class.

“Wonderful,” said Gerard. “This is how it’s done, people! They put the magic in — the snap, crackle, pop! Okay! Let’s open it up for comments.”

The class took his lead, complimenting our performance.

“What kind of preparation did you use?” asked one student.

I blushed.

Lisa replied, “Lots and lots of improvising.”

With no scene hanging over us, Lisa and I drifted back to being occasional friends and never pushed the limits again. I watched her closely over the next two years, never really trusting her, still trying to reconcile the scene, the sex, the scratch, and her sweet smile. I watched myself too. It was some time before I had sex with another woman. Eventually, I realized that it didn’t matter who I went to bed with — they all slept with me and my fear. The lessons I needed to learn were still years away, far from the pleasures and pains of youth. I would never be able to trust another person until I found a way to trust myself. **CC**